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Teaching with Kathy Davis

Life of an academic has always been divided between intellectual solitude spent writing single authored text, and intellectual public engagement of teaching. The distinction between the two aspects of this life: between research and teaching, is artificial as one cannot really teach without research of her own. But can one do research without teaching? The number of research institutes is decreasing, while research-only positions at universities are rare, often temporary and tend to evaporate as projects end.

Kathy Davis has been faced with triple burden in her career trajectory when she moved to Europe from the US: the burden of being a non-native scholar in a national academia; of being an interdisciplinary scholar in an academia organized along disciplinary lines; and of working in gender studies which started the fight for institutionalization at the time when Kathy Davis started her career in the academia. These structural factors resulted in her being hired for a research position without teaching component at Utrecht University. The consequences of this career move have influenced the legacy of her work since she does not have a group of PhD or MA students whom she has trained.

Kathy Davis quickly recognized that being involved in critical and engaged academic work in a meaningful way is impossible without teaching. Therefore she was ready to accept, besides conference and book talks, teaching assignments at summer schools and PhD programs. The fellowships she held in Bochum in the academic year of 2006-2007 as a Marie Jahoda Visiting Professor has also had teaching component and she taught “Feminist Health Politics in Transnational Perspective” and “Interpreting Intersectionality: Analyzing Gender and Its Intersections in Feminist Research”. Another doctoral course entitled “Academic and Creative Writing: Epistemologies, Methodologies, Writing Practices” was organized by Women’s Studies Centre in cooperation with Nordic Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Łódź in 2007 where she taught “Academic and Creative Writing in Gender Studies: Epistemologies, Methodologies, Writing Practices”. This course has had an afterlife because a follow-up course was organized by Nina Lykke in Linköping University, Sweden entitled “Academic and Creative Writing in Gender Studies”.

Even though academics are mostly hired to teach, they are evaluated based on their writing. Teaching students how to think is difficult, but teaching students how to write is even more difficult. On the other hand academia is about writing. Therefore Nina Lykke, Professor at Linköping University invited Kathy and myself to teach a course on Academic Writing. There were so many applicants for this course that we had to repeat it two months later in the early summer of 2008. That joint course was my first experience of a joint teaching with Kathy Davis, which happened in a non-traditional higher educational setting: a week of intensive training for bright and dedicated PhD students from all over the world. She gave two talks and a follow up workshops there: “Bringing the ‘I’ into Feminist Writing: Autobiography, Reflexivity” and “Getting Published in Scholarly Journal”, sharing her rich experience as editor of *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* (2003-2017).

Based on our joint work in Linköping, I successfully applied in the name of the three of us for the CEU Research Fund. Our small team, which Anne Brewster, Sissel Lie, and a former student of mine at CEU, Redi Koobak, have joined, engaged in a series of workshops and pilot teachings which resulted in publishing the book edited by Nina Lykke: *Writing Academic Texts Differently, Intersectional Feminist Methodologies and the Playful Art of Writing*, Routledge 2014.

It is not easy to define what makes an excellent academic a good teacher no matter that there is a whole academic industry working on this subject: teaching and learning centers are measuring and defining teaching outcomes in neoliberal academia. What I have found striking when I was teaching together with Kathy Davis was that she does not let the system or expectations define her, but rather she is defining her own world and values whatever it takes. As she put it in her most recent (and last) editorial for *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*: “I believe that we need to continue to try to change the kinds of scientific practices we advocate, how we engage with our students and how we interact with one another. We need to think about the kinds of role models we want to be for our students, encourage collegiality and create academic practices which critically intervene in masculinist science and reflect our ideals.” This might sound easier to say than to do but I would like to give three examples how Kathy practiced this intellectual and pedagogical autonomy as a teacher.

First, she sets up her own priorities: what courses she wants to teach: on body, autobiographical methods, intersectionality and writing academic texts, recently on passion. And she bluntly refuses

to meet institutional expectations if they do not make sense to her. She has been teaching a relatively few number of courses if we are applying the quantifying logic of neoliberal academia, but each of these themes have a different subsections and depth. I participated in several seminars given by Kathy on these four themes, and she never repeated either the methods or the contents but adjusted them to the given pedagogical context. Is this because she lived her intellectual life far away from the crippling routine of teaching big classes for years in a row? Maybe. But definitely she came to every class prepared with her admirably readable handwritten notes. She also took notes during the classes and made comments to students based on those neatly written notes. Not because she as a professor is required to give feedback but rather because she as a person found it important to give one.

Second, the way Kathy defines her own teaching environment helps her to resist the orthodoxies of gender studies. She does not let trends, fashion or imagined political correctness define her work and her thinking. It is interesting to observe how students of gender studies are using more and more often the canonized names of the profession ('theory stars') as a shield and as an identity marker without critically engaging with their work. The works of the 'theory stars', on the one hand, has substantially contributed to the knowledge production of gender studies, but, on the other hand, it has created hierarchies inside the profession which could be paralyzing for young academics as they quote the authors without engaging with their work. Kathy Davis recognized this spreading anti-intellectualism early on, and did her best to counteract it with her own example of being accessible and at the same time self-critical. As she wrote in her "Swan song" text in her last editorial: "I have been concerned with the relegation of Theory (with a capital T) to a handful of theory stars, the irrelevance of some contemporary feminist theory to real-life concerns, and the fear many feminist scholars seem to feel about actually doing theory in their own (empirical) research." What has been one of the most constructive elements of her teaching, which actually met with the most resistance from the students, was how to move beyond academic name dropping, no matter that the names you are dropping are the names of feminist scholars.

Third, speaking about Kathy as a colleague with whom I was teaching together several times, I would like to underline her being a nice colleague. In the case of tandem teaching very often the expectation is to let one of the teachers either shine, or to perform a consciously submissive role. I have not experienced this as her colleague, but rather genuine attention and intellectual support.

But being ‘nice’ does not mean that she is hypocritical as we are living in a time when everybody is expected to be “nice” to each other. She is nice with the reason, and also she is nice with passion. I am privileged to be one of those to whom she has been nice and I hope she will continue to be nice in the future.